

Buddhist Text Translations

- Their Correctness and Otherwise?

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In a vast segment of the world of Buddhism, scholars of unquestionable reputation are agreed that what is known as literature of the Pali Canon perhaps goes back to a date much earlier than the rest, such as Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, Chinese or Tibetan. What matters more here is not only the early or lateness of texts concerned but also the diversity of tradition they reflect. Agreed or not agreed, we do not propose to labour the point here any further.

Therefore when we speak of Buddhist texts here, we are primarily interested in Buddhist texts preserved to us in the Pali language. We would grade for our purpose what is contained in the Tripiṭaka or Pali Tipiṭaka [i.e. the Three Baskets of the Vinaya, Sutta and the Abhidhamma] as the earlier and more authentic of Buddhist teachings, presumably propounded by the Master himself and his eminent disciples of the day like Sāriputta, Puṇṇa Mantāniputta and others.

Subsidiary to this, we would place the Commentaries which, in most cases, are reasonably old explanations of textual material which needed further detailed explanations in the interests of the average listener. There were also other texts which lent themselves to a diversity of interpretations in the hands of interested parties. By the time of the Commentaries, the need to build safeguards against such deflections was also evidently felt.

For such Commentarial rebuttal of an emerging *antarābhava* theory, see the following remarks of the Commentary to the Udāna: '*Ye pana ubhayantarenā' ti padam gahetvā antarābhavam nāma icchanti. Tesam taṃ micchā. Antarābhavassa hi bhāvo Abhidhamme paṭikkhitto yeva... Ye pi ca*

antarāparinibbāyī sambhavesī ti ca imesam suttapadānaṃ atthaṃ ayoniso gahetvā atthi yeva antarābhavo ' ti vadanti... [UdA. SHB. p. 61f.]. For details see further.

The meaning in English of the above quotation would read as: As for those who take the word *ubhayantarena* [= between the two] and wish to postulate an *antarābhava*, they are in error [*micchā*]. They are mistaken. The existence of an *antarābhava* is **definitely rejected in the Abhidhamma**. Also those who **incorrectly render the meaning of Sutta words** like *antarāparinibbāyī* and *sambhavesī* **say that there is an *antarābhava* ...**[For their correct rendering see further the *Aṭṭhakathā*.].

Therefore it goes without saying that for a correct transmission of the Buddha word from generation to generation, one must ensure that the original Pali texts are correctly understood. This requires that one gains mastery of the Pali language, including all aspects like the historical growth of the language, paying due heed to stratification during various time periods. The language of the older metrical compositions like the Sutta Nipata and the Jataka verses certainly present themselves in a garb different from that of the prose sections of the Nikaya texts. The vocabulary and even the idioms of later prose and verse compositions like the Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā are discovered to be somewhat different from that of the older stratum referred to above. In addition to this, close association and impact with sister languages like Sinhala in Sri Lanka also tends to distort and deflect the precise meaning of words of the earlier language. The strength of an idiom of the earlier is often missed and lost in the latter.

Our studies in the field, covering much more than half a century, has brought to light a vast amount of such misunderstandings and therefore of misrenderings in the translation of Buddhist texts in Pali, both into English and Sinhala. As for other languages, we leave the issue open. What we attempt in this article is to draw attention to a very limited number of such instances and indicate the

seriousness of such errors. These lead in two directions both of which are equally damaging and disastrous. One completely misrepresents, undoubtedly through an inadequate grasp of the language, the ideas put forward in this wonderfully new approach to human and world problems undertaken in Buddhist thinking. The other dilutes and waters down these Buddhist ideas, more through wishful thinking and a conscious or unconscious attempt to harmonize and equalize. Both are unwarranted and are to be detected and corrected without any undue delays.

Buddhist texts themselves are internally aware of this gradual breakdown due to lack of precise grammatical studies and also about their very corrosive consequences. They constantly warn the new generations of scholarship about this. In this category of persons to whom this message and warning is issued, we have to include in the first group the disciples of the Buddha themselves who take upon themselves their monastic career or life of *pabbajjā* for the sake of release from *samsāra* and attainment of Nibbāna. This realization of the goal in Buddhism is referred to as *paṭivedha* or personal experience. As Buddhists, if we know what we are about, then it must also become clear to us, as monks or laymen, that this stage of *paṭivedha* or personal experience does necessarily come via the earlier stage known as *paṭipatti* or living the religious life as prescribed. And this becomes possible only through a careful and diligent study of the way as prescribed, i.e. as recorded in one's scriptural tradition.

It is here that every Buddhist has to take to a serious study of his creed or *sāsana* as in the phrase *etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ*. This we call *pariyatti* or learning and the accurate study and knowledge of Pali as the language of Buddhism is vitally important here. Learn your Buddhism through precise and accurate translations or learn it, if you can, in the original, via Pali. In the second group come the students of Buddhism, the researchers and others. With them too, we insist that accuracy and precision remain the hallmark of quality. But over the years we know how little attention is paid by both groups to these warnings.

Newer interests in the study of classical languages in the hands of amateurs, both monks as disciples in the faith and students only with an academic interest as well as the constant breakdown of our educational structures through immature and haphazard experimenting with them aggravate this situation more and more.

Let us now offer you a few specific instances. Here is a glaring mistake occurring, we believe, in all Sri Lankan Sinhala translations of the First Sermon of the Buddha, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. It should be reckoned as the biggest blunder of all times because it is a mistranslation of the tremendous tribute paid by the heavenly hosts, extra-terrestrials whoever they be, both the devas and brahmas of the entire universe that ' what has been preached by the Buddha at the Deer Park in Isipatana is **irreversible and unassailable** ' [*Etam bhagavatā bārānasiyaṃ isipatane migadāye dhammacakkaṃ pavattitam appativattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmanena ... kena ci vā lokasmiṃ ' ti.*].

The Pali word in question here is **appativattiyaṃ**. It is formed of negative prefix *a* + prefix *pati* which means backwards + verbal derivative *vattiya* from the verb *vatteti* = sets rolling or causes to roll [Associated with the concept of ' rolling the wheel of the law ' - *dhamma-cakka*]. Therefore it means ' that which cannot be made to turn backwards ', i.e. irreversible. At the latest, the Commentary to the Paṭisambhidāmagga [Saddhammappakāsinī PTS. II. p. 613 line 3 and SHB. XXI. p. 440. line 33] provides this meaning saying that ' it cannot [**asakkuṇeyyaṃ**] be made to go backwards [**pati- lomaṃ vattetuṃ**] saying that it is not so' [**na yidaṃ tathā ' ti**].

With a linguistic analytical approach, almost all English translators have rendered it correctly as 'irreversible' or 'incontrovertible' . It is more than unfortunate that the Sinhala translators, at all times, appear to have lost their linguistic sharpness here not to see the presence of the prefix *pati* with its powerful meaning of backwards, before the verb *pavatteti* which has its primary

meaning of 'roll on'. It has also the secondary derivative meaning of 'conduct, hold, carry on a job of work'. In Sinhala *pavatvayi*. So the Sinhala translators render it as 'which no deva or brahma could conduct or carry on'. We consider this a very serious error. This enables the Sinhala translators to reserve for the Buddha and for him alone the right to 'roll on the wheel of the law'. But the Buddha did not want it in that monopolistic way. At Samyutta I. p.191 the Buddha himself tells Sariputta ' Thus O Sariputta, you shall keep rolling the supreme wheel of the law which I have set in motion ' [*Evaṃ eva kho tvaṃ sariputta mayā anuttaraṃ dhammacakkaṃ pavattitaṃ sammadeva anuppavattesi.*]. We guess whether this new deflected thinking is the outcome of a self-adopted approach of Sri Lankans for the glorification of the Buddha as a unique personality. We lament that this distortion robs the dhamma of its unassailable veracity. It is time Sri Lankan Buddhist scholarship gives thought to it.

The second in our list for today is a very serious error with regard to a vital point of Buddhist teaching, namely the theory of soullessness or *anatta*. In the Alagaddūpama Sutta, the Buddha clearly indicates why in the Buddhist way of thinking it is not possible to entertain a theory of a ' permanent, eternal, unchanging soul ' which is identifiable with the world [i.e. microcosmic = macrocosmic] which persists from death to birth again, when ' well and truly what could be called a self or what belongs to such a self could not be got at '. Such a position, the Buddha points out to be a totally stupid one. Here are his own words. Please try to understand this bit of Pali yourself [*Attani ca bhikkhave attaniye ca saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne yam p' idam ditthiṭṭhānaṃ so loko so attā so pecca bhavissāmi nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tath' eva ṭhassāmi 'ti. Nanāyam bhikkhave kevalo paripūro bāladhammo ' ti.* [M.N. I.138].

We believe Lord Chalmers who translated this in 1926 in his Further Dialogues of the Buddha got the Pali perfectly well into English as follows: ' But, if really and truly there is to be found neither Self or anything of the nature of Self,

is it not mere absolute folly to hold the speculative view that the world around me is ' the Self ', into which I shall pass hereafter, -- eternal and permanent, everlasting and unchangeable, standing fast like heaven and earth?" [Further Dialogues of the Buddha I. 97].

More than a quarter century passed, and in 1954 Miss I. B. Horner brings out for the PTS a new translation of the Majjhima Nikaya entitled Middle Length Sayings. Miss Horner had already made known to the world of Buddhist scholarship her stand with regard to the concept of *anatta* in Buddhism. She is inclined to maintain that there is a concept of Self in Buddhism. We presume that she inherits a part of this belief from her teacher Mrs C.A.F. Rhys Davids. Miss Horner has co-authored with Ananda Coomaraswamy a book named Gautama the Buddha in which she defends her view. Whatever that be, in her translation of the above quoted passage from the Alagaddūpama Sutta, she gives the very opposite of what Chalmers says. Note below her translation which struggles and endeavours to justify her stand.

"But if Self, monks, and what belongs to Self, **although actually existing, are incomprehensible** [emphasis is mine], is not the view and the causal relation that: 'This the world this the self, after dying I will become permanent, lasting, eternal, not liable to change, I will stand fast like unto the eternal ' -- is not this, monks, absolute complete folly?" Our knowledge of the Pali language does not permit us to accept this. We do reject this as untenable. We have repeatedly expressed in many places our disagreement with her on this issue. Whatever comments you offer on issues like these, we maintain that in the name of intellectual honesty and academic fair play, one should get beyond a point of ambivalence.

Now a single sample, but a very serious one, from the area of historical documentation. This is about the baseless allegation that King Duṭṭhagāmani carried Buddha relics in his spear as he went to war with the Damilas. Referring to Duṭṭhagāmani's setting out on what we call this war of defense, the

Mahāvamsa [Ch. 25. vv. 1 and 9] says that the king had relics deposited in the royal scepter as he went out to war to liberate his country and the people from the menace of the invader. As a king he needed the royal symbol of the scepter, and the relics served to establish his identity as a Buddhist king. What he did according to the Mahavamsa was *Kunte dhātuṃ nidhāpetvā*.

Sinhala books of the 14th and 15th centuries like the Saddharmāṅkārāya and Saddharmaratnākārāya [that is well before our Sinhala and English translators of the Mahavamsa came on the scene] refer to the said *kuntaya* as *jaya kuntaya* and *jayamahā kuntaya*. Undoubtedly, the presence of the relics was symbolic of what he had to fight for. Whether you like it or not, he had also to be a Defender of the Faith. We were sure then and we are sure now that Duṭṭhagāmaṇi would have thought it vulgar to carry Buddha relics in a killer weapon as implied by *kuntāyudhaya* in the translation of the venerable Hikkhaduwe Sumangala Thera. [We have discussed this issue in great detail at the Royal Asiatic Society Annual Lecture - 1988. See JRAS New Series Volume XXXII. 1989. pp.25-44].

The latest howler that has got into our files in recent months [from the Ceylon Daily News of 7 - 2 - 98] is the translation, or rather attempted interpretation of a Pali quotation with which we have been familiar for very much more than fifty years. We run into it often in our Vinaya studies. It is as old as the time of the Buddha and is accepted as an injunction generally associated with him. In Pali it runs as *āgatānāgata cātuddisa-saṅgha*. Its meaning is very clearly ' **the monastic community of the four quarters** who are **both present and not present at the moment** '. It is essentially monastic in its implication and application. It has absolutely nothing to do with laymen or laywomen in any form, or with places and property of any one. It is being translated by some one as ' To the Multitudes from the Four Directions, Present and Yet to come'. It is fantastic to discover attempts to translate the word *saṅgha* [Sinhala *sagasa*] here as 'multitudes'.

It primarily refers to the gift of places of residence to the Buddhist monastic community. It originates then and there. As we said above, it dates back to the time of the Buddha himself and has nothing special to do with rock-cut dwelling places in Sri Lanka. At Vinaya II. pp. 147 and 164 the Buddha himself orders that gifts of residences to the monks be made in that manner, making them the common property of all members of the community, without any restrictions of time and place, four quarters implying place and present and not present implying time. At Vinaya I. 305 a further injunction makes the monks who are covered under that clause as ' of the four quarters ' the legitimate owners to the immovable property [*garu-bhaṇḍa*] of a dead monk.

This is by no means a Sri Lankan concept in origin. It is only a Sri Lankan usage derived from Indian Buddhism. But remember, yet it remains a monastic legal requirement. Once in Sri Lanka, it came to be written in Sinhala as *agata-anagata-catudisa-sagasa dine* for the information of both monks and laymen, so that the lay community knows that such gifted residences are not be made the private property of any single individual or selected group. In a country like Sri Lanka, the Sinhala Buddhists have to know their religio-cultural identity and the derivative traditions, in order to fit themselves smoothly into their social corpus. They must know their relationships to one another, to their men, women and children, including their religious mendicants. If out of respect for our ancient religious and cultural values one wishes to tap the past, one must assure oneself of the competence to handle the sources with accuracy and with adequate honesty. Any attempt by our Sri Lankan counsellors, academic or non-academic, to pour new wine into old bottles or old wine into new ones, and get our people off their feet with convenient newfangled ideas would be like, in the old Johnsonian jargon ' teaching your avuncular relations the art of ovi-suction '. Or in plain English it is 'trying to teach your grand mother to suck eggs '.